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ABSTRACT

In both speaking and writing, the goal is communication with the intended audience. Rejecting the view that rhetoric is based on an established set of conventions, this article examines the writings of Charles Dickens as models of rhetorical expression. Passages from Dicken's novels illustrate how the writer violated grammatical rules and broke down logical categories in order to convey meaning and character. In each instance, Dickens adjusted language to fit his audience, as well as the verbal image he was trying to present. The article advocates using the writings of skilled authors to teach students an integrated view of the traditional communication skills. (MAI)

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CHARLES DICKENS: MULTIFORM MODEL

Melvin H. Miller

Our modern textbooks in both English and communication have, for too long, focused not only on the painfully obvious but also the sometimes contrived differences between writing and speaking. As a result communication teachers have not, other than looking at an occasional speech, focused on models of good prose as being particularly germane to the study of speech any more than English teachers have looked at speeches as models of good prose. The student, thus, does not become aware of the variety of lexical and syntactical resources his language offers and he, more often than not, sees his language as bifurcated -- writing as one think and speaking as another. Too often he believes, as Sartre writes in his book The Words, "One speaks in one's own language, one writes in a foreign language."

Yet both writers and speakers attempt the same things. We know, for example, that the prime quality of prose style is clarity, or to use the sonorous Latin term, perspicuity. Aristotle said of speaking that "language which does not convey a clear meaning fails to perform the very function of language." Lord Macaulay said, "The first rule of writing -- that rule to which every other is subordinate -- is that words used by the writer shall be such as most fully and precisely convey his meaning to the great body of his readers."

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Yet our textbooks do not reflect often, this basic commonality anymore than they reflect the commonality of words or of structure or of adaptation to an audience. Here is a comment from what is probably the most popular high school text in communication in my state of Wisconsin. The writers quote T. S. Eliot: "If we speak as we write, no one would listen; and if we write as we speak, no one would read." Say the authors sternly, "The statement is strong but it is largely true."[1]

The teaching of such stylized behavior runs counter to both sound rhetorical theory and practice. As Hart and Burke have pointed out, "Because ideas themselves do not prescribe forms of verbalization, the rhetorically sensitive person tries to understand that an idea can be rendered in multiform ways."[2]

This insistence on focusing on differences rather than on commonalities appears particularly arid and negative when set against the study of those effective speaker-writers who have used their language to do what they wanted to do in whatever medium they choose to use. Speaker-writers such as Burke, Disraeli, Sheridan, Gladstone, Thomas Huxley and, of course, those we consider here today.

When we consider those skilled men and women who focused not on medium but on audience, not on grammar but adaptation, not even on words but the pictures words create, then we may begin to focus the really important questions of how one human being relates to another human being and the medium being used takes its rightful place as one variable to be considered among many. When we do that we are back to Donald Bryant's definition of rhetoric as "the function of adjusting

ideas to people and people to ideas." To me, that is what that fuzzy term, "back to the basics" ought to mean.

It seems to me that we have not often enough suggested to students that we are not just speakers or writers or readers or listeners but we are all of these almost all of the time. We have not often enough suggested that the level of language may be a more important concern than the medium, that adaptation means medium as well as audience and that communication is not a five minute speech or a five hundred word essay or a committee report or an interpersonal experience but that it is all of these and a great deal more -- a bewildering kaleidescope of constantly changing verbal demands whose very shape and color vary in complexity, in importance, and in formality and that it will remain so until the day we die.

But how do we demonstrate that? One way which is not used nearly enough, in my judgment, is to do what we are doing today -- looking carefully at those men and women who were in charge of their language -- all of their language. Those who were writers and speakers and readers and listeners and who used their language as a means to an end. Who did so in whatever settings and in whatever medium they either choose or found necessary.

One such example is that extraordinary bundle of cosmic energy flung into the middle of the self-satisfied 19th century -- the indefatigable Charles Dickens, a man so at home with words that he bundled up nearly six million of them into novels, plays, speeches, readings and essays in ways both so appropriate and so exuberant that they remain today very much a part of our lives.

I have discussed his speaking and his speeches elsewhere.[3] My concern today is to demonstrate that Dickens, with an overwhelming concern for his audience rather than himself or his subject, was able to move easily from one medium to another and that his ability to do so is instructive for all of us.

As we all know, Dickens had little formal education and throughout his life, he reacted to the traditional academy of his day about the same way he reacted to government bureaucracy. It did not help that the critics both of his day and later were not impressed with his lack of academic credentials. Consider the 1888 entry in the Dictionary of National Biography written by its noted editor Leslie Stephen: "If literary fame could safely be measured by popularity with the half-educated, Dickens must claim the highest position among the English novelists." And Bernard Shaw would later remark that "Dickens' early works were delightful only to simple folk, children and Americans."[4]

Yet ponder, if you will, this melancholy thought: Dickens had never been told that writing was one thing and speaking was quite another. Dickens had never been frightened by a pedagogue jealous for the integrity of a sentence or a grammarian who would insist that we do <u>not</u> write as we speak.

One has to wonder if Dickens had been parsed into perfection by a rigid schoolmaster, would we ever have had that delightful Pickwickian scoundrel, Alfred Jingle? Consider Jingle as he speaks, unaware that behind him stand a ghostly array of English schoolmasters, their rulers tapping out rule 64: "The verbless sentence is a contradiction in terms."

Jingle speaks:

> Ah! you should keep dogs -- fine animals -- sagacious creatures -- dog of my own once -- pointer -- surprising instinct -- out shooting one day -- entering enclosure -- whistled -- dog stopped -- whistled again -- Ponto -- no go; stock still -- called him -- Ponto, Ponto -- wouldn't move -- dog transfixed -- staring at a board -- looked up, saw an inscription -- "gamekeeper has orders to shoot all dogs found in this enclosure" -- wouldn't pass it -- wonderful dog -- valuable dog that -- very.

Critics and schoolmasters notwithstanding, Dickens was on the side of the angels or at least, Fowler, who observes that the only real question is, "Does it come off."

To be perfectly fair, Dickens was never exposed to any speech or communication teachers either to insist that a speech was not an essay. If he had, he might not have bothered to so carefully construct this conclusion to a speech using that scheme known as asyndeton. Here he is poking fun at the half-century of what he describes as minuting, memoranduming and dispatch boxing by officials trying to determine how to get rid of some old wooden sticks which had been originally used to keep accounts in the Court of Exchequer:

Says Dickens:

> It came to pass that they were burnt in a stove in the House of Lords. The stove, overgorged with those preposterous sticks, set fire to the paneling; the paneling set fire to the House of Lords, the House of Lords set fire to the House of

> Commons; the two Houses were reduced to ashes; architects were called in to build two more; we are now in the second million of the cost thereof; the national pig is not nearly over the stile yet; and the little old woman Britannia, hasn't got home tonight.[5]

Asyndeton -- that feeling of rushing to a climax by the deliberate omission of conjunctions between a series of related clauses, says Aristotle, is a particularly effective device in the preparation of a speech.[6]

Dickens may never have been exposed to formal schooling, but his indebtedness to the great writers before him, either directly or indirectly, is clear. The waspish Dickens, however, often denied that which was clearly so. He denied, for example, that he used real people for models although there are dozens of examples to show that he did. And so when he labels both Aristotle and Longinus as "police of taste who stultify original judgment," it is no more important a comment than his whimsical dummy library at Gad's Hill with its nineteen volumes entitled Hanssard's Guide to Refreshing Sleep.

I remarked earlier that Dickens had never been frightened by a grammarian. That is more than a factitious remark. I have been puzzled for a long time at the startling gulf which exists between the grammar which is taught and the grammar which is used. Sometime ago, I came across this comment by John Erskine who suggests an answer. Says Erskine:

> When you write, you make a point, not by subtracting as

> though you sharpened a pencil, but by adding. When you put one word after another, your statement should be more precise the more you add. If the result is otherwise, you have added the wrong thing, or you have added more than was needed.
>
> . . . the grammarian leaves with the unwary, the impression that the substantive, since it can stand alone, is more important than the adverb, that the main clause is more important than the subordinate.
>
> In the use of language, however, the truth is precisely the reverse. What you wish to say is not in the noun but in what you add to qualify the noun. The noun is only a grappling iron to hitch your mind to the reader's. The noun by itself adds nothing to the reader's information; it is the name of something he knows already, and if he does not know it, you cannot do business with him. The noun, the verb, and the main clause serve merely as a base on which the meaning will rise.[7]

I submit that what Erskine is saying here is a wedding of the ear and the eye which, when used, makes it remarkably easy to translate prose, either written or oral, into another medium. George Ford and Steven Marcus, writing in the New York Times recently, point out that Dickens had an uncanny "Camera Eye" which accounts for the more than eighty times that Dickens' works have been translated into film or television adaptations.[8] Others have demonstrated how deeply 20th century cinema has been indebted to Dickens' narrative method.[9]

Consider in the following short quotation from Hard Times how the so-called "camera eye" is, in reality, but a judicious use of modifyers and figures which bring a scene into clear focus:

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the pistons of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness.

Is it not a useful thing to teach a student that the growth of the power of language is not merely a technical development, but that it implies a growth of vision?

Is it not a useful thing to suggest that such a description comes alive not because it appears in a novel or a speech but because it "adjusts ideas to people and people to ideas?"

Dickens' language, as we know, is both creative and original -- qualities particularly admired by all of us who have to listen to or read those dreary patches of boredom labeled student speeches or student essays. We say that humor, for example, is often based on the unexpected but we don't always demonstrate that as well as Dickens does. Consider the impossible eccentricities of Mrs. Gamp, the disreputable nurse in Martin Chuzzlewit who deliberately breaks down all logical categories. For instance: "A pleasant evening, though warm, which we must expect when cowcumbers is three for

twopence." The weather becomes dependent on prices, not the other way around. On another occasion she says, "Rich folks may ride on camels, but it isn't so easy for 'em to see out of the needle's eye." Of course, students break down all logical categories also, but not because they are in charge of their language!

Again, we often assume that gestures are something we discuss in speech classes. Of course they occur in writing as well and, particularly, in Dickens. For instance, when Louisa Gradgrind, a young girl in Hard Times is kissed by Mr. Bounderby, the middle-aged businessman whom she loathes, Dickens analyzes her emotions by a gesture: "She stood on the same spot, rubbing the cheek he had kissed, with her handkerchief, until it was burning red. She was still doing this five minutes later." The orality of the prose -- the wedding of eye and ear -- is clear.

The use of the swiftly drawn analogy is of inestimable use to speakers. Consider this passage from the same work where the fire of the furnace is compared to the fire of human passions. When she is considering Bounderby's proposal, Louisa is asked by her father, "Are you consulting the chimneys of the Coketown works?" and she replies, "There seems to be nothing there but languid and monotonous smoke. Yet when the night comes, fire breaks out."

Dickens, himself, was quite aware of this need to meet an audience on its own terms. In a speech to the General Theatrical Fund in 1858 he says: "Every writer of fiction, although he may not adopt the dramatic form, writes in effect for the stage. He may never write plays; but the truth and passion which are in him must be more or less reflected in the great mirror which he holds up to nature."

Arthur Howe, writing in the Wisconsin Academy Review a year or so ago, reminds us that "Perhaps it is language's infinite capacity to resist anonymity that is its most enduring quality."[10]

In a world where anonymity is the deserved fate of the great bulk of writing and speaking, it is important to read and study and reflect on those men and women whose language survived that critical test. It is especially useful if that language lives not because of form or medium, but because it met a set of audience expectations uniquely well.

What we may discover for ourselves is the process of language at work in all its capacity and in all its infinite variety. We may see, if we will but look, the close affinity of all of the traditional skills of language. And even though we may never achieve that kind of mastery over words, it is no small thing for us or our students, to try.

Footnotes

[1]Ronald R. Allen, Sharol Anderson, and Jere Hough, Speech in American Society (Columbus, Ohio, 1968) p. 295.

[2]Roderick P. Hart and Don M. Burks, "Rhetorical Sensitivity and Social Interaction," Speech Monographs, XXXIX, No. 2 (1972) 75-91.

[3]See, for example, "Charles Dickens at the English Charity Dinner," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XLVII, No. 2 (1961) 143-149 and "Charles Dickens and his Audience," Central States Speech Journal, V, (Autumn, 1962) 283-288. All of the speeches mentioned may be found in The Speeches of Charles Dickens, ed. K. J. Fielding, (Oxford, 1960).

[4]George Bernard Shaw, "Shaw on Dickens," Dickensian, X, (March, 1914) 150-151.

[5]Speech to the Administrative Reform Association, London, June 27, 1855.

[6]Aristotle, The Rhetoric (Lane Cooper, Trans.) 3, 19.

[7]John Erskine, "A Note on the Writer's Craft," Twentieth Century English (New York, 1946). Reported in "Notes Toward a New Rhetoric," College English, XXV, No. 1 (October, 1963) 12-18.

[8]George Ford and Steven Marcus, "Dickens' Uncanny Camera Eye," New York Times, May 8, 1977, Section II, p. 29, col. 1. See also May 11, 1977, Section III, p. 22, col. 5.

[9]For example, see Anna Laura Zambrano, "Charles Dickens and Sergei Eisenstein; The Emergence of Cinema," Style (Fall, 1975) and "Feature Motion Pictures Adapted from Dickens," Dickens Studies Newsletter, (March, 1975).

[10]Arthur Howe, Wisconsin Academy Review, XXII, No. 1 (December, 1975).